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Christian Suffering; its Dignity and its Efficacy:

A

SERMON

OCCASIONED BY THE DEATH OF THE

HON. AMBROSE SPENCER,

AND

PREACHED IN ST. PETER'S CHURCH, ALBANY,

ON

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SERMON.

HEBREWS XII., 6.

"*Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth.*"

The bitter things which came into the world in the train of sin, came as its consequences and its punishment, poverty, trouble, sorrow, suffering, death, how wonderfully have they been transformed into blessings, or into means of obtaining a blessing by the power of the Cross of Christ! In and of themselves, considered merely as the fruits of transgression, they might be looked upon as the earnest of Hell; as tokens *in time* of the beginning of that wrath of God, which is to be more fully revealed in eternity. But now that our blessed Lord and Saviour, the adorable Son of God, hath partaken of all these bitter things, they are become efficacious for good; they are changed, for the children of God, into tokens of love; they are a purifying for Heaven, and they carry us forward step by step toward its everlasting blessedness. A divine virtue has flowed into them, all from Him who is our life.

Poverty, for example, was in itself a grievous thing; but when He who was rich, for our sakes became poor, that we, through His poverty, might

be made rich; when He chose to be born in poverty, chose to walk with the poor, to identify Himself with the poor, esteeming whatever should be done for them as done to Himself personally; when He called the poor first to be His Apostles, and to enter into His kingdom, and pronounced emphatically a blessing upon their state, then poverty, Christianized and lifted up by faith, began to have a certain mysterious dignity and preëminence about it. Then to be humble became the surest way to be exalted, according to the saying of our blessed Lord; "Whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister, and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant, even as the Son of Man came, not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many."

So also to be *born to trouble*, as the sparks fly upward, as men were, after the fall; to be in a world of sin and death, sorrowing all the day, like those who have no light and no hope, as without the mercy of God in Christ Jesus, men must always have been; *that*, surely, had been an exceedingly bitter and grievous portion. It is so now, to all who, through unbelief and impenitence, exclude themselves from grace and peace. But when the adorable One became "a *man of sorrows* and acquainted with grief;" when He wept over the sorrows which He was about to assuage; when He said, "blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted," then it was that a new thing was seen on the earth: the members of His body and

partakers of His grace were seen to "joy in tribulations," and to speak of themselves, in the darkest periods of distress and persecution, as being sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.

Again, *bodily suffering*, weakness, disease, pain, when seen in the light of nature, appears to be altogether evil, and not good. It implies that there has been a mighty falling away from the dignity and perfection of our first estate; that a fearful penalty has been incurred, and that the tendency of our being is toward a dark and awful catastrophe. But when we come to contemplate things in the light of Christian faith, the character of suffering, our view of its meaning and of its tendency, is entirely changed. Our sufferings are hallowed and sanctified, and made efficacious by the sufferings of our blessed Lord. When borne in faith, through His spirit, after His example, and for His sake, they unite us to His cross; they bring us nearer to Him; they render us more like Him. Instead of involving a kind of degradation and dishonor, as being tokens of decay and dissolution, they begin to betoken a rising to newness of life and glory. They come to have a mysterious dignity and worth; and we are even bidden to rejoice reverently, when they are appointed unto us, inasmuch as through them "we are made partakers of Christ's sufferings." Yes! they are Christ's own sufferings, for as members of His body, we suffer with Him and in Him. We are partakers of His fullness. We do nothing without Him. As our holy desires and our good works

are the operation of His spirit, so also in all our sufferings we feel the operation of His grace, and behold images and fruits of His cross, tokens of its presence and power.

In the last place, look at *Death*. Apart from the mercy of God, in Christ Jesus, it is simply the punishment of sin, dark and hopeless. It is the end of all that we naturally delight in, and the beginning of all that we naturally dread. To lay a child or a parent in the grave, is in the view of nature, to lose it forever; to descend into the grave ourselves, is to bid farewell to light, and life, and social joy, and to *go into darkness*, we know not whither; probably to something infinitely more terrible, than the mere dissolution of the body. No wonder that where death bears such a character, all men should try to keep it out of sight, and to forget it! But O! what a different thing is death, in the view of the Christian! For *him* to die is to be blessed! "I heard a voice from Heaven, saying unto me, write, from henceforth blessed are the dead who die in the Lord; even so saith the Spirit, for they rest from their labors." To die is to follow Christ. "To die is gain." To die is to put off the mortal body with all its weakness and misery, and to be clothed upon with something new and glorious, and immortal. The "vile body" is changed, and made like unto the glorious body of our Lord. The trials and sorrows of earth are exchanged for the everlasting joys of Heaven. Farewell sin, farewell grief, farewell pain and weakness! No more

conflicts, no more fearful strivings, no more seeing through a glass darkly! "The righteous hath hope in his death." Instead of shrinking from the grave, in horror and despair, we can go to it with tranquil assurance to carry our precious Christian dust, or to seek a resting place for our own mortal flesh. "We look, not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen." Christ hath died; yea, is risen again. Because He lives, we, His members, shall live also; and we can say, with an Apostle, "O, Death! where is thy sting! O, Grave! where is thy victory! Thanks be to God which giveth *us* the victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ!"

Such are poverty, sorrow, suffering, death, in themselves; and such are they as seen by faith, as transformed by the power of the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the one case they are simply evil, simply the punishment of sin, oppressive and hopeless; in the other case through God's mercy in Christ Jesus, they are His healing medicine to burn out our wounds, and to purify us for His presence. In them the Great Physician of our souls comes to us, and works in us graciously and healthfully; checking and removing the diseases of our souls by cutting deeply into our sensitive nature; severing the right hand, or plucking out the right eye, or fixing deep in the mind a rooted sorrow, which, all our life-long, may temper our enjoyments, may prevent us from seeking our rest here, may continually be to us as a messenger from the All Merciful,

recalling us from careless ways, and putting us upon a searching of our hearts, and a listening for His voice, and an earnest endeavor to do His will. Whether it be a transient pain of the body, or a deep seated anguish of the soul; whether a startling blow, to awaken us out of our sleep, or a gentle visitation in the usual order of His Providence, as the removal of parents, or wife, or husband, or children; whatever it be, it is the care of our Heavenly Father, checking our too eager love of life, opening our eyes to the vanity, or the insufficiency, or the evil of the things we pursue, and teaching us to look into ourselves to see for what hidden malady the bitter portion has been given to us to drink. "Whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth;" and He chastens that He may humble us, by discovering to us how much more we deserve than is laid upon us, and that He may gently lead us up thitherward, where there shall be neither pain nor grief.

Now such being the fruits of the cross of Christ, is it not wonderful that, in a Christian age, so many should regard poverty, and suffering, and death, very much as they would have been regarded, had the mercy of God never wrought a change in them? Even yet, to multitudes, they seem to be wholly evil. They are simply a punishment; or if not a punishment, they are considered to be so much deducted from our stock of enjoyment, without offering us any compensation. They are associated only with the idea of misery and loss. And hence the perplexity with which many persons look upon

the distribution of what they deem good and evil in this life. They see that the just suffer with the unjust; and that Providential blessings descend alike upon the evil and the good; and they say, that "all events come alike to all," to the righteous and to the wicked. Yet, surely, the thing is not so. There is a wide and a fearful difference; a difference as great as between a healing medicine and a deadly poison; a difference as great as between a token of God's mercy and goodness, and a token of His wrath. To the impenitent and unbelieving, to those who will not give heed to the call of God, who will have nothing to do with His mercy, to *them* affliction, and suffering, and death, *can come* only as messengers of wrath. The blessing being refused, it must needs follow, that they will suffer without alleviation from the bitter fruits of the curse. For it must be observed that, even under the dispensation of mercy in Christ Jesus, sufferings do not necessarily sanctify. They are only a season for sanctification. We may profit by them, or we may disregard them. We may even make them an occasion of repining against God, and of plunging deeper into sin. Here, as in every other part of the dispensation of grace, mercy is proffered; it is brought near to us in a very affecting way; but it is not forced upon us. Now, then, if some are purified after a heavenly manner by sufferings, and through their means replenished more abundantly with divine consolations, while others are only wounded and punished by them, then we see that

"all events" do not "come alike to all:" we see that even here on the earth, a *secret difference*, greater than human language can express, is made between the obedient and the disobedient, between those who do the will of God and those who do it not.

But this is not all. There are facts all around us which ought to give us a much higher and more reverent idea of the mysterious and solemn nature of God's visitations than we are wont to entertain. Not only do we not observe that men's afflictions are in proportion to their offences, but we observe in very many instances quite the contrary. We see that the most eminent saints of God have often been the greatest sufferers. There is a deep truth in the familiar words of the text; "Whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth." He chastens them, not only as a means of bringing them back to Him; but even after they have been brought back and truly turned unto Him; He often chastens them in a most wonderful way, as a means of weaning them more entirely from the world, of concentrating their thoughts and their affections more earnestly upon God their Saviour, and of bringing to a higher decree of maturity the graces of the Holy Spirit, faith, patience, love, resignation, humility, contrition, meekness, gentleness, dependence, thankfulness and devotion. O, surely there are degrees of grace here, as there will be degrees of glory hereafter; and there is a mighty difference between the Christian man, as we often see him in the world,

firm in principle, sincere in his faith and devotion, but intently occupied with the business of the world, careful and troubled about many things; I say there is a mighty difference between him and the same Christian, after he has been lying for months in the secret chamber, shut out from the world, tried and purified by suffering, his whole soul opened toward the Heavens to receive the gifts of grace, and his spirit instructed as it never was instructed before, in the knowledge of God and of himself. The one is a Christian man, in whom a true principle of holiness has been deeply implanted; who has been faithful in his degree, and of whose salvation, through the mercy of God, we cannot doubt. The other is a saint, purified in the furnace of affliction, and shewing forth, in a much more wonderful manner than the other, the beauty and power of Christian holiness.

Turn now reverently toward the memory of that great and good man, over whose mortal remains we, but yesterday, performed the last Christian rites. Not indeed by the rod of affliction was he first brought to make an entire dedication of himself to the service of God. Released from the cares of an arduous and responsible office, and beginning to taste the repose and the quiet of the evening of life, it followed almost of necessity that the same love of truth and of justice which had so nobly characterized his conduct on the Bench, that the same penetrating and far-reaching judgment which had made his perception of the right and the true, in the most

difficult cases, seem almost intuitive, should constrain him to consider more deeply his relations to the God of his life, and should engage him, at once, and with all his heart, to supply what had been lacking in his service to the Most High. Notwithstanding the habits and associations of a long life, his towering and sagacious intellect, guided by the Divine Spirit, quickly carried him to embrace what we regard as the fullness and completeness of heavenly truth, not only in its interior and spiritual substance, but also, as being of vital importance in its outward means and instruments. Then was beheld the spectacle of a Christian man, as firm in his principles, as earnest in his piety, as open and manly in his avowal of his religious faith, as he had ever been energetic and lofty in his intellectual and moral bearing. No man doubted his sincerity. No man but respected and reverenced him the more for the superadded graces of a Christian spirit. Scarcely had he arisen from his first kneeling at the altar of his Lord, when, as almost all have heard, though not through *his* agency, he addressed a most earnest and eloquent appeal, touching the matter of religious duty to his bosom friend,[1] one like himself, eminent for his learning, for his services, and for the purity and elevation of his moral character.

Up to this period, his health had been firm, and he had known little, scarcely any thing of suffering. Had he been called away then, all would have honored his memory; all would have borne earnest

[1] The late Chancellor Kent.

testimony to his Christian character, no less than to his unbending integrity and his commanding talents. Many persons would have said, he has departed in the true faith of *that* Holy Name; he has left us the heritage of a good example; what would you have more? My brethren, the adorable providence of God furnishes the welcome answer. He was, indeed, as we believe, accepted in the beloved; he was truly devoted to his God and Saviour; but he was to be purified in the fire; he was to be exalted to something more saintly in character; he was to be rendered meet for a far more exceeding, as well as an eternal weight of glory. As it is mysteriously and wonderfully said of our blessed Lord, that "He learned obedience by the things which He suffered;" that "in bringing many sons to glory," He, the "Captain of their salvation," was "made perfect through sufferings," even so was it in his degree with his honored servant, whose image never rises up before us, without impressing us with the idea of something pure and lofty and commanding. Yes! far beyond what it is easy for us to conceive, he learned obedience by the things which he suffered; he was made perfect through sufferings; and those nine months of unceasing weariness and pain, over which his friends have mourned, have been among the richest, if not the very richest of all the blessings, which God ever bestowed upon him. The effect was visible in numberless added graces, humility, meekness, gentleness, submission, patience, thankfulness, love. He saw things as he

had not seen them before. What had formerly been reached by a process of reasoning became an intuition. The clouds rolled away: the Heavens drew nearer: in the place of the commanding reason, came the simplicity and dependence and love of a little child; and the desire to depart and to be with Christ triumphed over all the ties of nature and over all the powers of the world.

No doubt, in any such case, suffering is a blessed thing. It is to be regarded reverently, as something in which our Maker's hand is at work, renewing the imperfect and decayed image of our souls. But in the instance now before us, it seems to have been especially appropriate as a token of love and a means of sanctification. Who, my brethren, can ever need to learn subjection, and dependence, and obedience, by means of weakness and suffering, if it be not one, whose days have been prosperous, whose health, through a long life, has been uninterrupted, whose lofty station and commanding talents have made him familiar with preëminence and control, but not with subjection and obedience, and who, from the very instincts of his nature, has been accustomed to achieve every thing by force of reason? O! he may be a sincere, and even an earnest Christian; he may have in his heart a true principle of obedience and love to God; nevertheless if he is to be *so* converted as to become "a little child;" if his character is to be purified and wrought up to a saintly degree of perfection; if he is to learn to trust implicitly, to revere mysteries, to adore the

incomprehensible greatness and perfection of his Maker; if for reason are to be substituted the higher gifts of intuition and faith; for preëminence, subjection; for control, obedience; for active energy and firmness and resolution, the passive graces of patience, meekness, gentleness, love, simplicity; if, in the place of elaborate reasonings, and searching enquiries, and multifarious views, all well enough in themselves, though not the best things to be occupied with when death is at hand; if, I say, in the place of these, is to come *an all-absorbing heavenly-mindedness*, a concentration of all the thoughts and affections upon just a few grand but simple things: the cross of Christ, the glories of Heaven, the mercies of God, (certainly the state in which we would wish to be found at last) then where are these things to be learned? Where is this wondrous transformation to be effected in such a character, *but* in the silence and anguish of the sick room; under suffering and weakness, borne for months in faith and in submission to the will of God; in love and in thankfulness?

O well might he rejoice in that he was made a partaker of the sufferings of his Lord! Well might he say, "it is good for me that I have been afflicted!" Well might he deem, that those chastenings, severe though they might be, were nevertheless the chastenings of Love. And well may we confess, that *that* which was wrought out, by the mercy of God, through suffering, could have been wrought out so wonderfully, so far as we can see, in no other

way. Let us, then, think more solemnly and reverently of the blessedness of suffering with Christ, whether it be bodily pain, or sorrow and affliction through the sufferings or the loss of friends.

Even now, among my daily duties, it is my privilege to sit at the bed-side of one, who, in a very different walk of life, has been wonderfully matured by suffering. How little she suspects the marvellous beauty of her own character! Not indeed from such a height had she to be called. Yet doubtless there was something in her to be purged away: and she, too, has come to the same simplicity and love and submission and trust and heavenly-mindedness, and desire to depart! In both there are, with many characteristic differences, the same unerring tokens of discipleship: humility, simplicity, dependence, love, devotion. How noble and how excellent, my brethren, must these qualities be! Since they are the highest, the ultimate fruits of holiness! How noble and how excellent must they be; since they are to be *permanent!* adorning the soul and constituting her blessedness through all eternity! Since *they*, more than talents, or learning, or miraculous gifts, are to be the glorious marks of conformity to our blessed Lord! May we covet those graces earnestly now, while we are in the midst of life, striving to perfect holiness in the fear of the Lord; and when it shall be our day to be called, may their divine impress be found full and clear upon our souls!

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